

Jim Hoagland

The Lithuania Waiting Game

PARIS—The most dangerous foreign policy challenge of his first 400 days has turned President Bush into Washington's chief owl. He sits tight and hopes that developments in Lithuania will make him look wise for waiting them out.

In this case, Bush nests with the owls by necessity as much as by temperament. He has no other realistic choice now that Mikhail Gorbachev's strong-arm tactics have raised tensions to the flash point in Lithuania.

The evolution of the crisis in Lithuania requires Bush to play big politics. He must bring together the common points of his political needs at home with the needs of his allies in Europe and finally with the desperate situation of Gorbachev, his partner in trying to wind down the Cold War. Bush's multidimensional strategy includes support for Lithuania's aspirations for independence and concern for Gorbachev's position, but allows neither to dominate.

Why such caution? In part because Bush knows that America's allies in Europe will not join in a campaign of

sanctions or even sustained criticism of Moscow over Lithuania. Bonn will not jeopardize German unification for the sake of the Balts. Paris and London feel they have too much invested in Gorbachev to chance contributing to his downfall. The allies' refusal to join a concerted campaign constrains Bush, who has put preserving unity with the Europeans at the top of his foreign policy goals.

The president is also reported to be determined to avoid a repetition of the 1956 tragedy in Hungary, when U.S. encouragement for Hungarian revolution was not backed up by U.S. action. Hawks who posture menacingly on Lithuania without any possibility of intervention invite a repeat of this Cold War tragedy.

Doves flutter nervously on the other side of Washington's political aviary, putting Gorbachev's survival above all and thus ceding back the ground the Lithuanians have in fact gained by their peaceful secession movement. Bush invites caricaturing as splitting irreconcilable differences; but he tries to protect a

weak hand by shifting his bidding as each day's developments dictate.

Bush began preparing for this challenge months ago as the signs that the Soviet empire was disintegrating began to mount. The contrast between his reaction to Red Army intervention in Azerbaijan and in Lithuania is not a contradiction but a matter of calculation.

The president tacitly supported indiscriminate Soviet force to protect Armenian lives in Azerbaijan. Given the political clout Armenian Americans claim in the Bush White House, condoning the Azerbaijan operation actually was in Bush's interest, as he subtly communicated to the Soviets.

In the Baltics, it is the reverse. Bush has also made sure Gorbachev understands this political fact of life. The pressure comes from those who want the Soviets out and the Lithuanians, Estonians and Latvians independent. The newly cooperative Bush administration attitude toward Moscow—which dates only from last September and is more identified with Secretary of State Jim Baker than with the Bush White

House—would be an immediate casualty of a bloodbath in Lithuania.

Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze should hear strong words from Bush in Washington this week about the campaign of intimidation and calculated force underway in Lithuania. Baker will warn that his policy of accommodation will be blocked unless the Soviets appear to try to resolve this crisis through negotiation. (Baker's ill-advised invitation to the Soviets to intervene in Romania last December rules out his being the heavy in these talks.)

Bad Cop Bush and Good Cop Baker will be carefully gauging the impact of their public words and acts on Gorbachev's domestic position, which has never been weaker despite his accumulation of institutional power. Gorbachev's foes will play the Who Lost Germany card in internal debate if unification continues to rush ahead on Bonn's terms. Also worrisome for the Soviet leader is the miserable state of affairs at home that greets Soviet officers being pulled out of Eastern Europe. Some of them live in tents for months with their families, Western diplomats report.

Worrying about the level of humiliation that the Red Army will tolerate before rebelling is not (and should not be) a traditional political concern for an American president. But just as Gorbachev has to worry about Who Lost Germany, Bush has to worry about Who Lost Gorbachev as a potential campaign issue. Lithuania reminds how closely intertwined the fates of the American and the Soviet leaders have become, like it or not.

Gorbachev's high-risk, aggressive tactics appear to be prevailing against the peaceful population of Lithuania. Bush hopes for no bloodshed so Gorbachev can find his way out of the corner he has backed into. But Gorbachev must know that he cannot repeat this crude intimidation and profit from it in the next showdown in the Baltics. It would be an admission of incurable political weakness that would persuade outsiders that there is no acceptable way to "save" Gorbachev. Getting this message across to the Soviet leader is a challenge worthy of Bush's finely honed political talents.